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Dear CIA: The question is, why?

For 11 years the mighty Central Intelligence Agency invested a lot of money and effort to "infiltrate" and to intercept the mail of a small Philadelphia-based organization called Women Strike for Peace.



It was completely illegal for the CIA to do this — a fact acknowledged by the CIA's agreement this week to pay Women Strike for Peace \$5,000 in damages — but it was also (and some may think this is even worse) incredibly inept.

Members of Women Strike for Peace (WSP) learned that the CIA had been spying on them in 1975, when a commission headed by then Vice President Nelson Rockefeller issued a report that both mentioned and condemned it. The CIA, it seems, had been spying on many American organizations in direct violation of its charter. (Domestic investigations are supposed to be handled by the FBI.)

Recalls Mrs. Ethel Taylor, national coordinator of WSP: "We were appalled, of course, and immediately filed suit. And we demanded a copy of our CIA file under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act."

That file is fascinating.

It tells of a woman (her name is blacked out) who was paid by the CIA to "infiltrate" WSP. (That certainly wouldn't have been hard to do. Anyone who walks in off the street is welcome.) This "agent" reported such tidbits as a decision to "rent buses to take members to Washington to demonstrate against the Vietnam War."

The CIA could have found that out by reading any local newspaper. The CIA did not have to send in a spy or clandestinely steam open mail to get at WSP's newsletters. Anybody can get on that mailing list.

Women Strike for Peace is simply a loosely knit collection of 15,000 women at best who believe in the ideal of international disarmament. During the '60s, its members frequently participated in protests against the Vietnam War. They marched. They sat in. They were never violent. And they were definitely never secretive.

A basic tenet of the organization is that ordinary citizens in all countries should get to know one another

and in that way further international understanding and peace. Thus, ever since WSP was founded in 1961, its American women have exchanged letters and visits with Russian women.

And, beginning in 1961, the CIA intercepted and made copies of their mail. Those copies were in the files:

"Dear Madame Popova. Thank you for the fantastic two weeks' hospitality . . ."

"We would like to continue to receive your newsletter. Since we have no American dollars, we will send you children's books and records . . ."

A WSP member visiting Russia writes back home: "I was taken in by two women doctors who immediately decided I was too thin and insisted on feeding me candy."

Imagine the CIA accumulating this sort of thing for 11 years!

Wouldn't you think that somewhere along the line, they'd have realized it wasn't worth bothering with — even if it were legal to bother with it?

Did those CIA agents think they were reading a code? Were they so paranoid that they thought any American exercising his or her Constitutional right to disagree had to be a foreign agent?

Or were they merely afraid they might lose some of their budget if they admitted such a group *wasn't* dangerous?

Last question: Can people who think this way be trusted to do *real* intelligence work? (They knew what was happening at Women Strike for Peace but not in Iran.)

This story is worth reviewing now, I think, because Congress is currently considering legislation designed to "protect and strengthen" the CIA.

The CIA claims it can't do its job unless it can be secretive. But this was the job it did when it *was* secretive.

If the CIA's idea of "intelligence" is to save letters from nice ladies in Philadelphia that say "I am fine, how are you?", it seems to me it isn't the CIA that needs "protection" . . . we do.

Rose DeWolf

Rose DeWolf's opinion column also appears on Monday and Wednesday in Focus.